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UNITED STATES TELECOM ASSOCIATION



Gene R. South Sr.

Taking Our Message to Capitol Hill: Don't Forget Rural America

Recently, I had the opportunity to sit down with Rep. Gil Gutknecht (R-MN-1), co-chair of the Congressional Rural Caucus. We had a good meeting about our home state of Minnesota, the new world of communications and the enduring importance of universal service. Congressman Gutknecht invited me to testify at a recent caucus hearing on the future of telecommunications and universal service in rural America. I was pleased and honored to share our united industry agenda and to offer the perspective of a company that serves predominantly smaller rural communities.

As the nation prepares to update its telecom laws, no segment of our country has more at stake than rural America. These communities are home to 1 in 5 Americans, but they are spread out over 80% of the nation's land mass, creating unique infrastructure challenges. It is critical that our telecom policies encourage investment from all market competitors today in order to speed new services, choices and value to rural America. Equally true, it is essential that we uphold vital social objectives—chief among them, our commitment to affordable, reliable access to a dial tone for all Americans.

All too often when people think of advanced communications, they think of big companies in big cities. I reminded members of Congress that smaller, rural telecommunications providers are great innovators as well. As this issue reaches your office, USTA's small company members are gathering in Minneapolis at our annual summit. This popular yearly event is a testament to the commitment of rural companies to being on the leading edge of telecom innovation.

How can policymakers in Washington help advance rural telecommunications? They can start by acknowledging the fundamental changes we see all around us today, most notably the rise of cell phones, VoIP, satellite television and a whole host of services competing across a variety of platforms. From that acknowledgement, we can determine that it is time for consumers to select market winners, rather than the government.

If this country remains committed to affordable, reliable access to a dial tone for all of its citizens, then we also need to ask all companies in today's marketplace to contribute to universal service, no matter what technology they use. It's the only way to maintain this commitment and to do so without placing unfair burdens on companies, and their customers, who do contribute to this vital national commitment.

At the hearing, Congressman Gutknecht said: "It is clear that rural concerns, especially reforms related to the USF, must be addressed when we rewrite the telecom bill. ...It is my hope that we can create a House 'farm team' that will advocate these concerns as we update this policy." His commitment is to be commended and his message should be heard by all Americans: As we undertake this vital reform effort, don't forget rural America.

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